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Stabbings in Japan Fuel Worry Over Temp Workers  
Man on Rampage May Have Feared Losing Modest Job

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Author: Hiroko Tabuchi

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TOKYO -- A stabbing rampage by a young factory worker is sparking renewed concern over a sensitive issue in Japan: the increasing number of low-paid temporary workers at the disposal of Japan's top corporations.

The suspect, 25-year-old Tomohiro Kato, worked at a factory in central Japan that assembled cars for **Toyota** Motor Corp. On Sunday, a week after his factory announced a downsizing plan, Mr. Kato allegedly plowed into a busy Tokyo street in a two-ton rental truck, jumped out and attacked pedestrians with a dagger. Seven people died and 10 others were injured, according to police.

The assailant was arrested at the scene, an electronics shopping district known as Akihabara. He was handed to prosecutors on Tuesday, police said.

Investigators are releasing little information about what Mr. Kato may be telling them, including a motive. Experts and local media have offered many explanations about what could have prompted the attack: Mr. Kato loved violent videogames; he was a misfit; he was drawn into an alienating world of Internet chat sites, which fueled his anger at society.

But a series of recent incidents at Mr. Kato's workplace, as well as messages allegedly posted by Mr. Kato on an online bulletin board shortly before the attacks, also paint the picture of an angry and lonely young man fearful of losing his modest temp job.

Mr. Kato is among a growing number of temp workers across Japan, one of the biggest labor trends here in the past several years. The shift to cheaper temp workers, who typically earn about two-thirds of what full-timers do and can be fired with short notice, has given Japanese companies flexibility and helped keep costs down at a time of stiffer global competition.

But the uncertain labor conditions that temp workers endure have created controversy in a nation that has prided itself in rewarding its workers with lifetime employment, affording a middle-class lifestyle to almost everyone.

More than a third of the people in Japan's labor force are categorized as "nonpermanent"

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workers, which also include part-timers and temps on fixed-term assignments. That compares with 23% in 1997 and 18% in 1987.

"Japanese used to find security and hope for a brighter future in their companies. But now, young Japanese often have unstable jobs and feel they don't belong, and have no future," says Masahiro Yamada, a sociologist at Chuo University in Tokyo.

Mr. Kato was known as a diligent worker at Kanto Auto Works Ltd., a **Toyota** group manufacturer with about 6,800 employees based just west of Tokyo. A native of northern Japan, he was sent to work at a factory in the central city of Shizuoka by a temporary-staffing agency in November, after a string of jobs. He earned about \$13 an hour and lived alone, according to his staffing agency.

In May, Mr. Kato appeared to become increasingly worried about losing his job, according to Kanto Auto spokesman Naoyuki Hashimoto. In one incident about three weeks ago, Mr. Kato accused his supervisors of plotting to fire him after the air conditioning for his section of the factory broke down. His bosses denied anything was at hand, Mr. Hashimoto said.

But later that month, the factory announced it was indeed firing all but 50 of the factory's 200 temporary staffers. Mr. Kato was told he could keep his job for now, said Hajime Shibukawa, an official at the staffing firm, Nikken Sogyo Co.

Still, Mr. Kato wasn't convinced. On Thursday, three days before the attack, Mr. Kato threw a tantrum and walked out of the factory when he couldn't find his uniform at the start of his 6 a.m. shift. He later told the staffing agency he suspected his bosses had hidden his uniform deliberately and would soon lay him off, Mr. Shibukawa said.

About that time, Mr. Kato appears to have posted messages on an Internet bulletin board that foreshadowed the attack. Police said Mr. Kato has told investigators he wrote several messages warning that he intended to commit murder.

In excerpts widely circulated on the Web and in the media, Mr. Kato speaks of his sense of hopelessness at work, and in his social life. He also gives a blow-by-blow account of his journey to Akihabara on frequent updates from his cellphone, the last of which was posted shortly before the attacks, according to the local media.

Kanto Auto defended its use of temp workers. "They come to us for work on the condition that their jobs are temporary," said Mr. Hashimoto, the spokesman. He said the Higashi Fuji factory, which currently has about 2,600 workers, was letting the 150 workers go because of an expected 10% fall in output as part of seasonal adjustments.

Unions on Tuesday, meanwhile, criticized corporations for their treatment of temp workers.

"At the root of the matter is how big companies treat temp workers," said Takeshi Koyano, head of Gatenkei Rentai, a coalition of unions that support temps mainly working in manufacturing and construction. "The conditions these workers face breed disillusion and hostility," he said at a meeting the coalition called to discuss the incident.

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